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CC: Kim Jennings/DC/USEPA/US@EPA
Subject: FYI - EPA Says Tests Show Water Safe to Drink In First Group of Pennsylvania Wells Sampled

From BNA:

Drilling
EPA Says Tests Show Water Safe to Drink
In First Group of Pennsylvania Wells Sampled

By Lorraine McCarthy

PHILADELPHIA—The test results of recent well-water sampling at 11 homes near Dimock, the northeastern Pennsylvania town where groundwater contamination was linked to natural gas drilling in 2009, did not show contamination levels that present a health concern, the Environmental Protection Agency said March 15.

The 11 homes were the first of 60 where EPA collected well-water samples between Jan. 23 and Feb. 15, in response to data supplied by concerned homeowners, to further assess whether residents are being exposed to hazardous substances.

Homeowners will be informed of the sampling results on a weekly basis in the order in which the homes were sampled, according to EPA spokesman Roy Seneca.

Seneca said EPA will issue a summary of its findings, but the Privacy Act prohibits the public release of results from individual wells.

EPA said water samples from six of the 11 homes tested during the week of Jan. 23 showed the presence of sodium, methane, chromium, or bacteria, but concentrations were within the safe range for drinking water.

Arsenic was identified in the water at two homes. EPA has been providing temporary alternate water supplies to three of the 11 homes, based on earlier data suggesting contaminant levels in their well water might pose a health concern.

Three Wells to Be Tested Further

The federal agency said it will continue to provide water to those homes pending the results of additional sampling to ensure that the drinking water quality remains consistent and acceptable for use over time. EPA said it will take a second round of samples from the two homes where arsenic was detected “to better characterize the water quality of these wells.”

EPA said it has offered to meet with all the residents to go over their data and answer any health-related concerns.

“Our actions will continue to be based on the science and the law as we work to help get a clear picture of water quality for these homes in Dimock,” EPA said in a statement.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) in 2009 held Houston-based Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. responsible for high methane levels in some private water wells in Dimock Township, finding that faulty casing and cement in natural gas wells the company had drilled in the area had allowed methane to migrate to groundwater.

Under terms of a 2010 settlement with the state, Cabot supplied water to 19 Dimock-area families until Nov. 30 when DEP determined that the company had satisfied the conditions of the settlement and allowed Cabot to end the water deliveries.

Homeowners Unconvinced

But many Dimock residents maintain their water has been unfit to drink since Cabot drilled wells nearby and pressed for EPA to get involved.

The federal agency did so in December after receiving data from homeowners that left open the possibility of gaps in water sampling and sample results (05 DEN A-8, 1/10/12).

EPA's actions met with criticism from DEP, which accused its federal counterpart of disregarding the state's technical expertise and extensive data collection and enforcement efforts.

Cabot also was critical, saying EPA is duplicating work already done by both DEP and Cabot.

In a statement issued after EPA released the results of sampling for the first 11 homes whose wells were tested, Cabot said it is pleased the data “confirmed earlier findings” that the water meets regulatory standards.

“We hope that lessons learned from EPA's experience in Dimock will result in the agency improving cooperation with all stake holders and to establish a firmer basis for agency decision making in the future,” the company said.

Anti-Drilling Group Faults EPA Findings

Meanwhile, the anti-drilling organization Water Defense criticized EPA for implying that Dimock drinking water is safe to drink based on “only partial results from less than 20 percent of households under investigation.”

Claire Sandberg, executive director of Water Defense, questioned the standards EPA has applied to determine safety, noting that previous tests of Dimock wells have shown high levels of a number of contaminants that present possible health risks but for which safe levels have not been determined by either state or federal regulators.

Sandberg called on EPA “to immediately release all available testing results and affirm its commitment to a transparent and unbiased investigation.”